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### Interview with Mike Petee

Leslie Lasiter

Mike Petee

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**Accession Number: PS-MS-TR-LASITER-02092012**

**Researcher's Name: Leslie Lasiter**

**Event: Interview with Mike Petee 2/9/2012, 4:00 PM**

**Place: The Place at the Woodward, Mount Vernon, OH**

**Duration: 20:37**

MP: So now that I've talked more than you could ever want. What questions do you have for me?

LL: So the exhibit will focus on public spaces and where people come together and these places that are significant to the community. You kind of explained this a little bit already, but just to get it on tape all at once, what is significant about this place?

MP: I get the newspaper here and there are two radio stations in the area. The Naz's and then especially the AM radio here. With each show they come in and do an interview, like the lady who is from Hinkley, OH tonight. That's the neat thing. Each year we have four or five people who make their debut on stage. They get pretty nervous. The Ohio Humanities Council likes that we're kind of an incubator for these scholars. So how bout I let you become the interviewer?

MP: It gives the opportunity for all different types of arts and educational programming at a reasonable cost. We average over one hundred people per program for the Chautauqua. There's a core, some of whom are elderly. We've actually done our own statistics and a lot of younger couples, a lot of different class of people come. We're always trying to get more high school students but that's a tough group to get. In essence, it's an opportunity for community building. It brings in educational types of things, musical types of things, opportunities you normally would not have, and I just think it's a win-win-win situation. It provides an opportunity to make some money for the performers and the only time I make any money is if I'm a performer.

Again especially from a Chautauqua standpoint, it's neat because you learn more about a person as opposed to the history books. From my own experience, I'll take biographies, autobiographies, and you really live in the space. What was it like to live in that space. Over the years, our community has questions. You can tell the questions are getting more educated. Communities who embrace the arts, and it has been proven statistically, make money. Because A, you tend to have higher educational opportunities, you also tend to create jobs, and you usually have lower crime rates. I guess the goal that I'm seeing is, our main thrust is to reopen the Woodward which would be the oldest opera house of its kind in the United States.

I think if you were to talk about branding, this town, if you're familiar with Branson, you have a certain kind of draw there. We do draw in people from out of town, and

several different countries, but really all around the state. We're the only monthly Chautauqua in the state, which is quite an honor.

MP: When you think of the Woodward and you think of the historical value, what has gone on there in the past, some of the revivals, what I'm doing with the Chautauquas. We bring in theater groups to use the space and it allows them to grow. We're not only providing a good entertainment for your community but you're also bringing in people from outside the community to hopefully inject some commerce into the community, but you're also developing that culture.

I'm looking for the point when basically I'm too old to be able to do this and have people who will say "I still like this and will continue to build it." As of yesterday, Pat grow also helped, they want you to become self-sustaining, so they'll help you with grant money. They want to see the community embrace it. So it really says a lot that community believes in it, or else they wouldn't be coming.

LL: What is the atmosphere like when there is a show? Do people get together? Do they talk?

MP: We have the typical core group, and many of them are from Licking County, Morris County. They'll come and get together and maybe go to Sips or the Alcove. So there is some help to the local merchants. We've had a very very good response to our work. What we've seen over the years, we used to have to push to get some questions out, and now sometimes the Question and Answer period can last longer than the actual presentation. So, the people are fascinating. We have people who come to specific shows who have been ancestors. Depending on the character, almost every character, many people will come up and chat for like fifteen to twenty minutes.

It really has become a social type of a thing and a lot of friendships have grown, so I like seeing that. Not only are the Chautauquas but the Tobachi groups, they will have their recitals there. The Mt. Vernon players perform here. We can all win. We won't make a lot of money but we have an opportunity where normally we would not have it. We're creating our own stuff, as opposed to saying we have to go out of town and not get jobs, we'll make our own jobs here.

LL: Where do you see it going in the future?

MP: I would like to see it self-perpetuate. We draw not only performers from the Ohio Humanities Council, but like the woman tonight, I'd never heard of her. She contacted me. She heard about us and she's a comedienne by background. Buzz, I guess word of mouth did it. We've gotten some funding so we can go into the high school and we'll do six class periods. Last year we did Mark Twain because he interacted with, he was a part of the curriculum. Robert Bennett from Kenyon, an emeritus professor, does Walt Whitman.

What I want to do is show people that it's cool, entice people to give it a try. I got Pat Crow, he's a Mormon by religion, and he's done Brigham Young. It gives kids an

opportunity to learn the craft, it gives them confidence building. They'll write their own stuff and present it to people. Then they'll grow up and teach people. We want to draw into the Naz and draw into Kenyon, anyway so that people say they're interested. Rick Sheffield evaluated it and wanted to do something with it but we weren't able to tap in. Anyway, it'll get full to capacity often. I'm trying to think of some things that thematically fit your idea.

LL: Well I'd like to come to the show tonight just to get a sense of how it goes.

MP: That's great. Well it'll be great to get your opinion on it. Opinions are like posteriors. I've never even heard the woman who is playing tonight. A lot of it is just trusting instinct.